

Two articles in national newspapers recently came to my attention: two flickering lights of hope in what feels like an election year fueled by despair. Both were written by well-known conservatives. Both wrote about the presidential debates. And both stood in stark contrast to the relentlessly uncharitable blame that seems to be characterizing an increasingly mean-spirited campaign season.

One article was written by Martin Feldstein, who was President Ronald Reagan's chair of the Council of Economic Advisers. The other was written by David Brooks, a conservative political columnist for the New York Times and the PBS NewsHour. Feldstein headlined his February 21st Wall Street Journal article, "The U.S. Economy Is in Good Shape." Brooks titled his February 9th New York Times column, "I Miss Barack Obama."

Both writers have some disagreements with the Obama administration, but neither of them resort to blaming others for causing their own misfortune. Recognizing that we all bear *some* responsibility for our situation together, both writers are alarmed by some of the fear-based proposals based on unfounded exaggerations and sensationalistic finger-pointing emerging from the current campaigns.

Brooks denounces the exploitative arousal of base emotions in American politics. "People are motivated to make wise choices," Brooks wrote, "more by hope and opportunity than by fear, cynicism, hatred and despair." He then went on to praise Barack and Michele Obama for consistently exuding a basic care and respect for the dignity of others.

Appealing to hope *does* motivate people to make wiser choices, but *wiser* is not *easier*. Blame and criticism come far more easily to all of us. Arousing pessimistic fear is easy, especially when we can find some group of people just different enough for us to blame. Blaming others for their own misfortune implies that they are also responsible for any consequences rippling our direction because of their sins.

Some people blame the Obama administration for creating the very situations they are trying to correct, while others blame Congress. Some blame Democrats for being weak-kneed. Others blame Republican obstructionism. We

blame political correctness. The one percent. We bounce the blame and criticism like a pinball: Obamacare is ruining the healthcare industry. No, it's big pharmaceutical. We blame attorneys. Immigrants. All Muslims, all Jews, all fundamentalists. We blame all religions, all atheists—*those* people, whoever those people are for each one of us, *those* people are the sinners. They brought this on themselves and now we're all suffering because of it. We do it on smaller scales, too: She shouldn't have been dressed like that. He shouldn't have been in that neighborhood in the first place.

Do you notice how easily produced and widespread blame can be? Having someone else to blame does help us to name something that we can't stand, but it also does two other things: blaming and criticizing leaves us feeling a little whiny and with time, even cynical, and they generate more feelings of frustration and impotence because they remove us from the action.

Jesus hears the same kind of grumbling about the Pilate and the Romans. He sees people all knotted up about murdered Galileans and the Tower of Siloam. The people apparently wonder what these people did do bring such a fate upon themselves. But instead of speculating and criticizing, Jesus chooses another option. Jesus challenges the people by interrupting their expectations with a parable—one that creates an opening into which hope can arise. Jesus does not indulge their move toward shifting responsibility to the victims. Jesus doesn't excuse Pilate's behavior or even address what role the casualties played. He does something rather remarkable instead. Jesus turns the people's attention back to themselves.

Those people, like us, live in a world with both bad actors and horrifying accidents. But God's children are not defined by that which opposes us. Nor does God punish people with death for misbehavior. We may *have* obstructions that frustrate or anger us, and we may *act* in ways that separate us from God, but we do not need to live fearfully enslaved by our emotions or our sins.

Neither do we need to *ignore* these aspects of our humanness, talk each other out of them or "fix" each other. Instead, we can turn to them as rich resources of humility. There's a rare seed in them that, if we allow God to nurture them, can help us to remember what we stand for and whose children we are. God can meet us in these events and grant us new conviction and hope that

generates life-giving energy for those around us instead of helplessly pointing fingers.

That's the revolutionary option that Jesus provides in the form of a simple parable about a fig tree that has been intentionally planted in a vineyard. The tree in this parable has lived in fertile soil with reliable and plentiful water, and a gardener's knowledgeable support. The gardener knows that it takes a fig tree three years to mature. The owner has come to see that the tree is cut down because it is not producing. But the gardener asks that the tree be spared because he is willing to provide that which is needed to stimulate a fruitful response from the tree. The gardener uses the same word here that Jesus speaks from the cross. The word *implies* "let it alone," but it actually *means* "forgive."

You see, what opens the opportunity for bearing fruit is not our relative merit or the work we do, but the rubric of forgiveness that we live under, just like the fig tree. In first century Judeo/Christian thought the fig tree symbolizes spiritual knowledge and manure represents humility. God works humility down into our roots to inspire us to change our focus from all that may or may not be wrong with others or what we can't stand. With God's help, the influence of humility changes us, reminding us of our own responsibilities and rebinding us to what we stand *for*. With time and God's nurturing touch, our hearts, minds and souls bear the fruit of life-giving conviction and hope.

Ours is not to change the world—ours is to change ourselves in the section of the vineyard where we have been planted so that God can bring life, love and redemption to a world clearly aching for something better—a world that seems increasingly reduced to frustration, anger or self-righteousness.

So if you want to join God in bringing forth the life-giving fruit of spiritual insight already seeded within you, there are two areas of movement to watch for. The external movements involve the presence of the master gardener spreading the holy gift of rich, life-giving humility around us. I have noticed this presence in the images sent back from the Hubble telescope. I have seen in it the amazingly delicate hands of newborn babies, and I have seen it in the broken hearts of emergency room staff who could not save a life despite doing everything they could think of. Anytime the mystery of creation begins to well up in front of us in a way that gets our attention, even intuitively, so that we begin to see that what

is happening is somehow significant, *holy* even, those are moments when we see our life set amidst God's yearning. Those are moments drenched with eternity.

The internal movement to watch for involves God's role in our hearing, in our reception of God's presence. We are never left by ourselves because the God who speaks the Word into our midst also pours the Holy Spirit into our hearts. That's what draws us into God's story until, in time, we learn that our lives have been taking place within the context of God's story from the beginning. Now we notice God's presence within us giving us ears to hear; tongues to speak.

This is the process called "dilatatis cordis," the opening and widening of our hearts. I'm not talking about angioplasty here, but a movement of the Holy Spirit that expands our lives and our awareness so that we can perceive truth emerging through our lives.

The Holy Spirit's expansion of our hearts and minds can be exhilarating *and* disturbing. Where once we may have imagined that we could reasonably manage our lives, we now begin to see the significance of our choices and actions rippling outward, and returning to us with consequences. When the Holy Spirit begins to widen our hearts, without disregarding facts external to us, we begin to ponder the consequences of our own actions and attitudes. We may even begin to be noticing circumstances in a new way. God has embraced this world just as it is, which means that everything that you and I do, everything that you and think, takes place against the Divine landscape. God's meaning emerges in that light.

God loves all people, even those people—including me and you—even those people who may or may not have had some part in bringing difficulty or tragedy upon themselves. God does not punish with death, but forgives and grants us time and space through the Holy Spirit to conceive and bring forth God's Word in our own lives. The more we become Word-bearers to others, the more God can propagate fruits of life, hope and love. If we do not let God transform our blame and anxiety, then we will most assuredly transmit it. With God's help as our gardener, why not, instead, become antidotes to fear, cynicism and despair?